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Compelling Contentions for Developing a Full-fledged Indian Communication Theory – A meta-theorization

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The paper intends to raise two compelling and pertinent questions as to the methodological approaches being pursued in media and communication research in India. The paper also calls for an in-depth discussion among Indian media academics about the issue of blindly applying Western media and social theories to the problems plaguing Indian media and society. Evidence for this contention emerges mostly from an analysis of theses data available on the Indian UGC website of Shodhganga¹. The author argues that the problems of Indian society and the media should be addressed from within the parameters and variables of Indian culture, tradition, and ethos. Frankly speaking, Western social and media theories have also emerged from within the frameworks and parameters of respective countries' cultures at some time back. It is also a fact that these Western theories have not been developed or formulated keeping in mind (the intellectual plane) the entire world in general or India in particular. While the relevance of these Western theories to the entire globe stands as a big enigma, which has not yet been fully addressed to a logical end across the globe, these so-called Western theories together have, unfortunately, been dubbed as 'dominant paradigm'.

It is important to realise that Europe's countries, which don't even have as many people as a district in India (which is the size of a sample of the Universe), have contributed at least one social or media theory to the field of knowledge. At the same time, India, which has the second most people in the world, hasn't really added much to social or media theories that are worth mentioning in its research papers or theses. For example, the author wants to talk about this part of what Europe has brought to social and media theory. Everyone knows that "peace journalism" was innovatively put forward first by Professor Johan Galtung, a leader in social science academics from Norway, a tiny nation in Europe. But how many Indian academics, scholars, and media students know that Johan Galtung (1985, 1996) was a pioneer in developing this theory from the perspectives of Eastern philosophy, including Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and Hinduism (Gunarante et al., 2015)? Everyone knows that Buddha and Gandhi were the apostles of peace in India. Another classic example for developing social and media theories from native cultures is that of Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp, a Soviet folklorist and literary scholar, who offered for the first time the basic structural elements of Russian folk tales. These irreducible structural units later came to be known as the primary requirements of a fiction, be it a drama or a film.

Around the turn of this century, three characters of Sri Lankan origin who started their careers as journalists—Dissanayake (1983), Gunaratne (2007), and Seneviratne (2012)—have successfully related the basic tenets of Buddhism to journalism and mass communication. Ironically, the Marxist ideologues in India have reduced Buddha and Buddhism to a simple individual and individualistic ideology, depriving him of the Hindu religious aura and its philosophical annexation to his Realization. Thus, Indian scholars have lost the opportunity to exploit the most convenient school of Buddhist thought for developing a media or journalistic theory. The work of the above cited three Sri Lankan scholars has come to be known as "Mindful Journalism," which in many aspects is more relatable to India than Johan Galtung's Peace Journalism. Warren Buckland (2012) writes that, according to Peter Brooks, 'the origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath' (1995, 14-15). Brooks added that 'this is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: the moment that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the

traditional sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society’. (1995). This is enough to prove how academics and social scientists in Europe and the West are keen to develop and write theories about the happenings around their times.

The problem ailing Indian academia is that its academics as well as students engaged in the study of sociology and communication do not go through the circumstances under which Europe or the West developed the theories relevant to their societies. In his publication on the unbearable lightness in Indian media research (2016), published in the *International Communication Gazette*, the author of this work wrote: Western scholarship has encountered this problem in a different way. Jensen and Neuman (2013) observed that despite the historical limitations associated with the ‘effects theories’ (of Laswell, Hovland, and Berelson), many scholars still tend to apply them to interpret the current media phenomenon in the digital era, and many to many communications through social media (p.231). It is also very pertinent to note the observation of Thomas Hanitzsch (2008) who wrote that, ‘while observing that cross-cultural research in journalism is immensely helpful in addressing compatibility issues between media systems of different nations, he wondered how the conventional Western values of objectives of journalism fit with non-Western cultures (p.94).

Initially the US scholars have rejected the media’s ability to produce ‘strong effects’ following Paul Lazarsfeld’s ‘two step flow theory’ (1955). However, in the course of time, it evolved so that there was a return of ‘strong effects theory’ which is continuing to dominate the film world even today. George Gerbner was a strong supporter of Laswell’s ‘strong effects theory’. His Cultivation Theory was based on ‘Strong Effects of Media’ only. Today, a number of theories in Visual Communication are ‘strong effects’ models by and large. On Aug 19, 1992, George Gerbner declared it as: “I came to the conclusion that communication is really where the action is—political action, social action, cultural action”. This shows that the “strong effects” of media and communication never stop and continue to have their own effect on the larger masses. It opens up one of the two questions that the author has spoken about in the beginning of this paper. If any of the Western models of Communication is relevant to Indian culture, on what parameters should the Indian academia decide to adopt it? Georgette Wang (2012) proposed a via media model between culture specific ‘emic’ approach and culture general ‘etic’ approach. According to Wang, in respect of culture general the Western communication models could be of some help. Yet, the present author has found that Thomas Kuhn’s (2012/1962) irrelevance/incommensurability (I/C) is very difficult to overcome as India offers a vast diversity where culture, language, traditions, and folk histories, local legends exert a great influence and act as local barriers to the straight one-to-one adoption of Western communication models. Edward Said (1978) exposed the false cultural assumptions that Western academia had made in establishing the ‘Oriental Studies’ schools in their universities. He strongly argued that the Western position of arrogating itself to impose ‘dominant paradigm’ in the name of Eurocentrism is misfounded and fraught with the cultural destruction of the Orient. Nair (2012) in her path breaking work-The Gaze of the West and the Framings of the East (Frontiers of Globalization) has clearly established the ability to of India to have its own communication theory citing a number of culture specific (emic) supremacies. The author has argued earlier that India is an excellent ground for research on Indianized communication and media theories citing how Everett Rogers (1999) has led his famous research on innovation diffusion through a study at two places Kheda and Jhabua--where India’s first satellite experiment, namely SITE was conducted during 1975-76 (Contractor et al, 1988). Rogers also conducted an empirical study on the effects of Education-Entertainment program of Hum Log--a teleserial telecast for Indian audiences during 1982. Based on these studies Rogers established that there is a gap in the communication research between one to one interpersonal communication and one to many communication research the divide being two subdisciplines which may also be understood as two separate paradigms in the practice of research (Contractor et al, 1982). Though Srinivas Melkote

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Way back Kincaid (1987) edited a path-breaking text that examined communication from the perspectives of the classical philosophies that influenced China, Korea, Japan and India. Early work of J. S. Yadava and others in developing specific Indian communication models (especially at the village or grass root levels) have offered a lot of promise in developing a full-blown Indian communication theory. Even though Sadharanikaran is based on the Indian seer Bharatmuni's *Natyasastra*, Adhikary (2010) and others tend to call it a Nepalese theory of communication. This is because Adhikary is from Nepal and works at Khatmandu University. The author of this paper has written a series of papers arguing that Indian society and the media should be approached through their local ethos, traditions, and culture rather than through smuggled post-colonial and post-modern theories. The author of this work has clearly proved how the post-colonial scholars trained in the West have distorted the novella Devdas and tended to grossly misinterpret the roles of Devdas, Chandramukhi and Paru (2016). While he argued for de-westernizing media in keeping with the theoretical enunciations of Curran and Park (2000), authors like Daya Kishan Thussu argued for internationalizing media studies. The author opines that Thussu's suggestion of 'internationalizing media studies' is even more problematic as it does not fully address the questions of 'etic'/'emic'. There would be a number of gaping holes that need to be addressed at another level should we to accept Thussu's contentions.

Whatever may be the contentions with regard to the specific term—de-westernizing or internationalizing—the need for developing an Indian Communication Theory is very important in the light of two facts: firstly India has enormous cultural diversity and synthesis as well and this author has put out a lot of material evidence through a series of publications suggesting that there is no hindrance to develop a full-fledged Indian communication theory; secondly, the commensurability/incommensurability (C/I) or irrelevance/commensurability of Thomas Kuhn need to be critically examined before making any attempt to apply a Western model of Communication, or Journalism theory to Indian media and society. At present there is a need to address the questions raised above by the entire Indian academia without fear and favour.